

The EAS needs to be improved. Simple warnings are insufficient. People also need to understand where to go and what to do. Public education is needed before and after any warnings. See attached research paper, presented recently at the Ethics Division Conference of the National Communication Association.

The Information Railroad Is Off The Tracks:
Unexamined Consequences of Media Community Service

by
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ABSTRACT

Failures after Hurricane Katrina inspire research. Using interviews and document review this exploratory study examines the whether commercial broadcasters have a legal or ethical obligation to provide life-saving public service announcements. The original Communications Act of 1934, modeled after the earlier Railroad

Act, states that one purpose of the public airways is to transport information of benefit to the public. People assume that, when needed, they will receive life-saving information from commercial broadcast media. The conclusion of the study is that this popular assumption is incorrect. Commercial broadcast media are no longer legally obligated or ethically consistent regarding transportation of messages that can save lives and protect property. Some stations air "cause-marketing" and offer other community service messages to substitute for public service announcements. This study indicates that the previously reliable information train is off the tracks.

THE INFORMATION RAILROAD IS OFF THE TRACKS: Unexamined Consequences of Media Community Service.

Many researchers have studied problems with communication during and after catastrophic events such as the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001 and Hurricane Katrina, 2005. Commercial broadcast stations often give disasters maximum coverage. Stations depict the unusual events as human-interest stories and as opportunities to be critical of government response to human misery (Quarantelli, 1997; Smith, 1995). However, basic educational messages even those that might save lives and prevent property damage sometimes remain undelivered (Benight et al., 1997; Carroll et al., 2005; Halvorson, 2002; Kumagai et al., 2004 A, B; Taylor et al., 2005). The topic of communicating essential life-saving information to the public has received little attention. The broadcast system was originally designed to serve the public interest with essential information. This study looks at whether commercial broadcasters have a legal or ethical obligation to provide life-saving public service announcements and tries from a system theory perspective (Forrester, 1975, 1971) to determine if that system is still reliable and deserving of the implicit trust often afforded to it. It is important to determine whether broadcast media are providing the public service information people really need. For this exploratory study, public service information is defined as any educational information that can be sent from an expert to the

public in order to help prevent loss of life or to protect property. If broadcasters inadvertently withhold or misframe critical public information, they may be unaware that they are harming victims with the unexamined consequences of their decisions. When broadcasters do not reliably relay essential public service information new strategies may need to be used to prevent catastrophic communication breakdowns such as the ones that occurred after the 9/11 terrorism attack and recent hurricanes. Insufficient communication to the public, especially during times of crisis can have grave social and ethical consequences.

This line of research is important for planners who wish to protect the public. They need to understand whether or not the public is able to reliably receive life-saving information from the broadcast media. Other researchers focus on whether media messages are effective and whether people take appropriate actions based on media messages. By focusing on disaster information, using interviews and document review, this study looks at whether life-saving messages are actually being broadcast to the public and extends the current body of research on declining delivery of public interest information in commercial broadcast media.

Problems Inspire Questions

Some scholars and public officials believe large corporate media no longer serve the public interest (Ray, 1990, p. 170).

According to a past Federal Communications Commission member, “public interest information has declined...I’ve seen a decline. I’ve seen it in surveys and polls. Study after study has shown that it’s declined in the last 20 to 30 years”

(Tristani, personal interview, 2005). Others feel that the profit motive is greater than the public service ethic (McChesney, 1999).

Two other reasons may be explanatory; one is that major broadcast media are no longer required under current FCC regulations to provide public service information to the public (National Association of Broadcasters, 2005) and the second possible reason is that there is insufficient ethical review.

One goal of this exploratory study was to discover whether broadcast media professionals perceive they have any obligation, legal or ethical, to communicate public service information to the public. The term “public service” in this study is intended to

mean the same as “service to the public” or “service in the public interest.”

Four research assumptions

1. The first research assumption is that media distribute information. The Center for Media and Public Affairs clearly states one assumption as the first sentence in a study titled “What People Want From the Press: The media serve an important role in society as distributors of news and information to the American people.” (Center, 1997).
2. A second assumption is people need public service information especially before, during, and after natural or human-created catastrophic events.
3. A third assumption is that broadcast media are best able to provide such information, especially concerning fast-moving events.
4. Another assumption is broadcasters should convey essential public service information; that they have legal and ethical obligations to do so.

Issues to Explore

The public needs, wants and expects public service information. Experts need and want to provide such information and often use “public service announcements,” press briefings and press releases to media outlets. Many examples of press releases and public service announcements are easy to retrieve, 24 hours a day, on line. Two relevant sites are www.redcross.org and www.fema.gov. This researcher reviewed media monitoring reports, at sites such as Vanderbilt Television News Archive, (2006) trying to confirm that specific pre-Katrina messages were used. This researcher was not able to find a single use of the messages posted on the FEMA and Red Cross websites prior to Katrina’s landfall. This researcher could not check every radio and television station in the United States so there may be missed examples.

What Others Have Found

Natural resources researchers found that commercial broadcast media cover disasters more than they cover less destructive events (Beebe and Omi, 1993). Analysis of coverage of wildfires and other disasters shows such coverage tends to be sensationalistic, focusing on the drama of the event. Broadcasts concentrate on the

impact on people and property and looked for opportunity to place blame (Smith, 1995). An entertainment angle often shapes the news coverage (Quarantelli, 1997; Smith, 1995). There may be in-depth coverage about a disaster and disaster victims, but victims describe receiving insufficient information directed to and for disaster victim needs (Benight et al., 1997; Carroll et al., 2005; Halvorson, 2002; Kumagai et al., 2004A, B; Taylor et al., 2005).

According to research, several factors influence the coverage of disaster events, including the sources of information available to reporters, the reporter or assignment editor's evaluation of the importance of the event, and the demands for media attention in relation to other events (Quarantelli, 1996; Smith, 1995).

Researchers describe media reports as inaccurate, incorrect, and often used as entertainment, but not as public service information (Smith, 1995). Even researchers outside of the United States have similar observations, "...headlines are enough to indicate the media's objectives in reporting the news, highlighting human tragedy, speculating as to cause and indicating possible blame" (Payne, 1994, p. 25).

Victims want and need information to help them decide what to do (Taylor et al., 2005, Benight et al., 1997; Graham, 2003; Halvorson, 2002; Kumagai et al., 2004A and B). Horlick-Jones (1995) relates that people often feel a betrayal of trust by contemporary institutions. Victims want information to help them plan their actions. Some researchers call this mobilizing information. However, according to Lemert (1984) media are reluctant to provide mobilizing information. Under some circumstances, people tend to oversimplify disasters and make inappropriate and incorrect causal attributions about why there was loss of life, or damage to property (Kumagai et al., 2004A and B). Media ethicists (E.B. Hindman, 2003, Limburg, 1994) address questions relating to the accuracy or the honesty of the media, and response to perceived ethical transgressions.

A large body of literature discusses media effects on everything from health to politics. However, research on providing information to people so they can minimize loss of life or damage to property is limited to brief mention in disaster communication and crisis communication literature (Mitchell, et al., 2005) and

some recently published opinion pieces. For example: “One possibility seems not to have occurred to them: Their own institution – television news, especially 24-hour cable--might have been at least partially responsible for the fact that some New Orleanians chose not to evacuate before the hurricane made landfall” (Galupo 2005), and that broadcasters may have unintentionally encouraged wealthier people to stay in New Orleans hotels and inadvertently contributed to deaths (Kepner, 2005).

Do commercial broadcast media reliably provide public service information (intended to save lives and minimize property damage) when required? There seems to be no recent research on this specific question. A preliminary literature review left unanswered questions that might be addressed with a review of broadcast history.

History

The Communication Act of 1934 established what we now call the Federal Communications Commission or FCC. According to hearings testimony that preceded adoption of the act, legislators modeled the Communication Act after the Transportation Act. The authors of the bill spoke of “carriers” of information (Hearings, definitions section 3, h, 1934). Testimony indicates the authors of the original act desired to carry information to the American people from experts in order to keep people safe and informed. "Broadcasting" means the dissemination of radio communications intended to be received by the public (Hearings, definitions, 3, r, 1934).

In the final bill a stated purpose of the FCC was to “to make available, so far as possible, to all the people of the United States a rapid, efficient, Nation-wide, and world-wide wire and radio communication service” (Communication Act of 1934, t.I, S.1, p. 1, 1934).

The final regulations required broadcast media (at that time, radio) to provide for the public interest in order to qualify for a license. “The Commission, if public convenience, interest, or necessity will be served thereby, subject to the limitations of this Act, shall grant to any applicant therefore a station license provided for by this Act” (Communications Act of 1934, S. 307 (a) p. 22).

However, according to interviewees, the FCC web site and the

National Association of Broadcasters website, beginning in 1982, the FCC removed the requirement for transporting public service announcements. (FCC, 2006, NAB, 2006, <http://www.nab.org/about/timeline.asp> retrieved December 10, 2006). Many researchers seem unaware that the current regulations allow stations the option of defining “service to the public” in the manner they feel appropriate.

The FCC revisions (Telecommunications Act of 1996) allow mergers which also minimize public access to essential information. As media consolidate, local radio and television stations are disappearing and being replaced by large corporations. Others have documented that local stations are in the best position to transmit information critically important to the local audiences (Hindman, D.B. and Coyle, K., 1999). However, with major consolidations many stations reduce or remove local staff and local programming. Remote computers accomplish programming from regional offices. Remote stations provide little opportunity to transport essential information to local people. “Many of the [communication] challenges are attributable to the decisions on programming being made outside the service area of the radio stations,” (Virginia Governor’s report, 2003, p. 53). Schorr D., speaking at a Washington State University Edward R. Murrow symposium said, “network takeovers, even when ideologically neutral, represent a potential threat to the quantity and quality of public information from the nation’s most important source of information” (Proceedings 1985, p.11).

Different expectations

Recent publications show major problems with communication to victims and to the general public after disasters. Many leap to the easy conclusion that the problem is lack of communication between police and firefighters (Martinez, M. 2005). Often that is true, but the real communication problem may be that there is no longer any reliable way for emergency officials to communicate to the public. However, most of the research is focused on other issues such as public opinion and truthfulness of information (Taylor et al. 1988). Research regarding communication to disaster victims is limited to brief mention of its insufficiency.

An underlying assumption in most media research appears to be that

there is a functioning conduit to transport expert information to the American people. Some authors lump information and entertainment together, and using media systems theory, suggest that both can be satisfied by mass media consumption (Demers, 2005, p. 161).

In 2005, Hurricane Katrina caused the largest national disaster response in the history of the United States. The unpublished proceedings of the media conference “Hurricane Katrina—Journalists as First Responders” includes relevant discussion to show some media representatives do not perceive a legal or ethical requirement to distribute life-saving information. During the conference, Lieutenant General Steven Blum, public information officer for the National Guard response in Louisiana, sharply criticized reporters for insufficiency in messages urging people to get out of harm’s way before the storm. “Where was your outrage at the number of people staying?” Blum demanded, acknowledging that thousands remained in New Orleans in expensive high-rise hotels. Reporters at the conference defended their coverage by blaming government officials for poor planning and the victims for not being smart enough. One reporter rephrased his criticism of the victims to say he only meant to blame those who did not have the “means or intellectual fire power” to leave (Conference CSpan CD final section